



Daniel Ellsberg <

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Ellsberg recent pieces

Sat, Aug 4, 2007 at 4:22 PM

Dear Dan,

Thank you for sending me your writings, which I will read with great interest. I have already read some and enjoyed them very much, in particular your "foreword".

I share a lot of the views you expose so well in the writings on "nuclear terrorism", but I don't share your view that we have effectively "used" nuclear weapons after Nagasaki. I don't see that our nuclear threats ever really achieved anything. E.g. Iran has not been deterred from pursuing its nuclear activities by our putting the option on the table. Did the nuclear threat achieve anything in the Vietnam war? Tell me more about it that I may not know. I also don't see that Israel's nuclear threats have achieved anything. And do you really think the Soviet Union would have attacked Western Europe if we had committed to no first use?

The one example that is always used is the "official story" that Saddam Hussein was deterred from using chemical weapons by Bush I's nuclear threat. But why should one believe that? It is a self-serving story, that provides "justification" for keeping the option on the table against non-nuclear countries, which to me doesn't make any sense. There was no rational reason for Saddam to use chemical weapons to hold on to Kuwait, it was a losing proposition, with or without the US nuclear threat. To me the opposite makes a lot more sense: Saddam was fully prepared to use his "weapons of last resort", irrespective of the nuclear threat, IF Bush I had decided to go on to Baghdad. Bush I and Cheney at the time knew that, and that is the real reason why they didn't invade Iraq then, because they did not want to pay the cost in US lives and they knew the world would not have condoned a US nuclear use in an aggressive war like that. That's why the invasion was postponed till 2003, when they knew Saddam had no longer a usable chemical arsenal. So I believe it is Saddam that effectively "used" his WMD and actually changed the course of history (stayed in power 12 extra years), not us.

So my point is, our nuclear threats against non-nuclear countries in particular have never bought us anything and never will (until we put them in practice), because they are not believable. When you argue that they have, in a sense you are providing justification for those that advocate keeping the option on the table, because it supposedly has provided benefit to us. (I know you don't interpret that as a "benefit", but others do). So in a lopsided way you are helping the "enemy".

I simply don't believe the reason the option is on the table is to achieve things without using it. As you say and I fully agree, there is a large cost in having it on the table, which is it encourages proliferation. Those that want to keep it on the table know the cost, and are happy to pay it. They want it on the table nonetheless because they are creating conditions to actually use it; afterwards the option will indeed be believable and only then will we be able to "use" it the way you describe.

So I believe concentrating on the narrow goal of taking the option off the table against non-nuclear countries is much more urgent than going for "big" goals such as nuclear abolition and even no first use. And much more achievable. ?

Would you support an initiative urging Congress to pass a law outlawing the use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear countries? Just that narrow goal, nothing further?

Best regards,

Dear? Couldn't we get
a vote on "no attack w/o Cong
auth"?
All candidates favor that!
major
What NWS do you want to
allow F-U threat against? (Favors SU?)

There are no
longer any
NWS who
are not NPT
members!
Pak? (HRC)

8/21/07 3:48 PM

Pak
(before the
deal)



Daniel Ellsberg <

Ellsberg on first-use

mail.com>

Tue, Aug 21, 2007 at 6:37 PM

(I must have pushed the Send button just now by mistake; I wasn't finished with my comments. Starting again:)

Dear Jorge: I've wanted to comment on this, but I'm at work on a piece about First Use--the subject of your message here--and I wanted to have a draft of it to show you (due Sept. 1). However, some comments here. First: you should look at my 1981 article Call to Mutiny, attached, if you haven't seen it already (I suspect not). I'm using it as a framework for an updated article (Sept. 1), or the first part of that, since it ends 25 years ago. Have you seen the article by Stan Norris and Hans Kristensen, in the BAS, Sept-Oct 2006, pp. 69-71, vol. 62, no. 5? Same theme (in fact, it's odd, to use a word, that they didn't reference my Call to Mutiny).

Second: Since you are such a close reader, I am surprised and perplexed that you have so misread *misread* my theses on first-use, in the articles I sent. You describe me as having the "view that we have **effectively** 'used' nuclear weapons after Nagasaki." But you have added a key word, which I have never used and never would (as a generalization, and only tentatively or problematically in a few specific cases). In my often-repeated statements about "use" I do **not** speak of "effective" use.

My point is that presidents who have used nuclear weapons by threatening them (or contemplating or preparing threats or attacks)--i.e., every one of our presidents from Truman on--have **hoped** that they might be effective in this function. And in a number of cases--importantly, Eisenhower in Korea in 1953, perhaps Eisenhower in the Taiwan Straits crises of 1955 and 1958, Truman in Iran in 1946 by his account, Truman in the Berlin crisis of 1948, George H.W. Bush in the Gulf War 1991 (see James Baker), perhaps (or perhaps not) others--the presidents and/or their advisors **believed** they had been effective, not necessarily by themselves but a helpful factor in getting their way.

Both of these are important phenomena, because they bear crucially on why presidents come to value nuclear weapons (even if they don't start their terms with such an attitude: that is probably true of JFK, LBJ, Carter, perhaps Clinton), why they cling to them and take steps to maintain their "credibility," steps that doom real arms control let alone disarmament or abolition, and above all, why they or their successors **continue to make such threats**. If they didn't believe such threats by themselves or their predecessors **might** worked/helped, or in some cases did prove effective/helpful, they might still have reasons to continue to stockpile and deploy and "modernize" nuclear weapons but, I believe, the number and force of these reasons would be much reduced, and the prospects for effective pressure for reductions or abolition much enhanced.

Your argument, then, would be well addressed not to me but to presidents and their advisors, whose **beliefs** about past (and future) effectiveness or potential effectiveness it would be well to challenge.

On the other hand, I doubt that you could convince them that nuclear threats **never** "really achieved anything" (beyond, of course, enriching arms makers, an achievement I think you would recognize). First, because these beliefs are strongly entrenched in some, I believe; second, because your argument is not as compelling as you think, especially for their **potential** in some cases that might arise and for a few past cases. ~~I~~ yield to no one, you or anyone, in the strength of my feeling that presidents **should not** have made these threats and **should cease** to make them. But it is both unconvincing and unsound, I think, to rely on the argument that the reason for this is that "our nuclear threats ("against non-nuclear countries in particular"--actually, I would reverse this, to apply relatively strongly to threats against nuclear states, i.e. the Soviets) "have never bought us anything and never

*so - I will now address effectiveness. Check your hand
failed. Others were not necessary (had no effect).*

will...because they are not believable."

As my own much earlier work on bargaining (see "The Theory and Practice of Blackmail," in Oran Young, ed. Bargaining) suggests, it is wrong to suppose that such a threat must appear thoroughly credible, certain to be carried out if defied, for it to be effective; the mere possibility, or perhaps in a given case more than that but a likelihood far short of certainty, **can** be effective, as presidents have clearly hoped or believed, not unreasonably.

Nor do I think that all past threats have been pure bluffs, by any means, though several of them probably were. For an important example, I think Saddam Hussein would have been very ill advised to think it "unbelievable" that he would have gotten a nuclear weapon on Iraq, even on Baghdad, if he had used nerve gas warheads (which he had, weaponized and deployed) in the missiles he fired at Israel; according to Sy Hersh (to me), Israel had explicitly, secretly, threatened to reply to that with a nuclear weapon on Baghdad; and it would be very reasonable for the Israelis to believe that that is why the Scuds used only conventional warheads. *That is probably not the only case that the Israeli believe their threats bought them something, with some reason, whether in the end they are right or not. They feared an Egyptian attack on Dimona in 1967, which is why they hastily armed one or more cobbled-together atomic weapons then, and presumably let the Egyptians know it. [NOTE: the following was not sent earlier.] Moreover, in 1972, their threat to their ally, Nixon, apparently delivered personally at the White House by Golda Meier, that they would or might have to use nuclear weapons if the U.S. did not promptly resupply weapons got an immediate air resupply: an effective case of the "Samson option," a major reason for having nuclear weapons, so regarded by the French and the South Africans, among others*

Likewise, you yourself credit Saddam's implicit threats to initiate WMD's (gas, or BW) against the US (or Israel) under certain circumstances, with being very effective: "the real reason" they didn't go to Baghdad. (I don't know of any direct evidence for your flat assertion, by the way, though it's plausible as part of the reason; Bush and Scowcroft don't mention it in their convincing list of reasons for not invading Iraq, which seem quite sufficient and which should, by themselves, have deterred Bush's son).

If Israeli threats of WMDs and Hussein's threats of WMD's can be believable **enough** to be effective, why not US threats?

At the same time, I would agree with you that even a non-bluff threat may not be effective, even if believed. I don't think Nixon's threat in 1969, in connection with the Duck Hook planning, was a bluff, although the scale of the Moratorium demonstrations on October 15 and November 15 were critical (I believe, contrary to Jeff Kimball) in causing him to draw back from carrying them out and to cancel his secret SAC alert. Perhaps I am wrong. And I don't know how much the North Vietnamese credited them, if at all. But in any case, there is no question that this was a threat that was blatantly ineffective.

And as you point out, Bush's current threats have not stopped the Iranians from enrichment nor softened their stance in negotiations. (The Iranians may believe, as I take it you would, that these threats are "unbelievable." **I don't**, and come to think of it, you don't either! Witness your extreme concern, which I share, that Bush is actually seeking an excuse and occasion to use tactical nuclear weapons, in this case against underground bunkers. The worst of it is, I think that the Iranian leaders mistakenly **under-rate** the credibility of his threats both of non-nuclear attack and of nuclear attack; perhaps they overrate the will and ability of foreign powers, our allies or Russia and China, or of Congress or our public, to stop him.)

You state that Saddam certainly would have used his WMDs if Bush I had invaded Iraq in 1991. I'm not quite sure of that, since I believe it would have been suicidal for him. Contrary to your argument, I don't agree that under those circumstances --which would imply that Bush-I had already discounted the concerns of his allies by moving ahead--Bush would have been stopped from responding to nerve gas against US troops with nuclear weapons by concern for world reaction. You say "they knew the world would not have condoned a US nuclear use in an aggressive war like." I'm not sure they "knew" that, and I doubt that it is true, in an effective sense. 1) Would the world have seen the continuation

of our attack as "aggression" (even if they would not have favored it)? 2) Just how would they fail to "condone" it? We committed blatant aggression four years ago, and "the world" seems to have condoned that very well, unfortunately, despite unprecedented demonstrations by publics, which seem to have been without effect. In 2003, just what would other states, or their publics, have done if we had responded to WMD-use by nuclear FU? 3) given a nerve-gas or BW attack on our troops (or British, or on Israel), I don't think Bush I, let alone Bush II, would have given a rat's ass what the rest of the world thought, or did.

But at the same time, Scott Ritter has asserted, from his experience in Iraq, that Saddam **was** committed and fully prepared to launch nerve gas warheads at Tel Aviv **if he were killed**. Ritter says he had mobile missiles--Scuds, the kind that we found or destroyed none of prior to the end of the war--deployed under totally trustworthy commanders, with orders to fire them if they had word of his death (or perhaps, if special communications with him went out). The fact that this would **assure** an Israeli (and perhaps US) nuclear attack on Iraq did not deter him from this commitment (since he would be dead anyway). This fits your argument: that even a certainty of retaliation might not be an effective deterrent. But it didn't deter the U.S. from making every effort to find him and kill him during the war; because, astoundingly, he didn't communicate it to the U.S., Israel or the British during the war! The US should have feared this possibility anyway; but either they didn't, or it didn't deter them.

(There was an exact counterpart to this during the Cuban missile crisis. Contrary to our intelligence estimates, he had sent nuclear warheads, both strategic and tactical, to Cuba; and he had done what we would not have believed he would do, he had delegated the use of the tactical FROG missiles to his local commanders, in case of a U.S. invasion. Knowledge of this would have been an absolute deterrent to such an invasion, in the minds of JFK and McNamara. **But they didn't know it, because Khrushchev didn't choose to tell them.** I can only conjecture, not very confidently, why he acted this way.

He was acting exactly like the Soviet Premier in *Dr. Strangelove*, who arms a Doomsday Machine before he gets around to telling us. In the movie, this leads to the end of all life on earth. But art was imitating life, without knowing it, in this 1964 movie; it came out two years after Khrushchev and Kennedy and Castro came within a hairs-breadth of triggering the U.S. Doomsday Machine (SAC, with its then-current plans for hitting cities and causing as-yet-unimagined nuclear winter). All that was needed was for Castro's antiaircraft gunners--not subject to control by Khrushchev, as we supposed--had had better accuracy on Saturday, shooting down U.S. low-level recon planes after the U-2 was destroyed by a SAM--likewise without Khrushchev's authorization--that morning.

If Saddam **had** been in the underground shelter full of civilians that we destroyed with cruise missiles, as Bush hoped, or had been found and killed in one of the homes of his mistresses that we targeted, it would not have blown up the world; but Tel Aviv would have been hit with nerve gas and Baghdad with a nuclear weapon. Sadr City would not be a problem for us now. We, and everyone, would have different problems.

So, the threat-game has real and vast risks for all parties, large and small, which is one major reason I oppose it totally, without claiming that it can never "work" as well as fail. It is because any threat **can** fail that threats are so dangerous (as well as inflaming arms races and proliferation, with ultimate risk to all humankind and other species). It is because they **can** be effective, and especially because leaders believe this--whether or not they did work or were likely to in any particular case--that they continue to be made.

I believe, in contrast to you, that the most convincing and therefore potentially effective case for abandoning them is in light of their enormous dangers (**and the moral danger** of asserting or accepting that the risks of such threats and the human costs of actually carrying them out are at all **morally legitimate**, that such threats are to be considered "options" for a president to "put on the table"). I have not relied on your argument (which has long been familiar in anti-nuclear circles) that they **cannot** effectively serve any political bargaining or coercive function.

I further say, the president has **no right** to put such threats on the table, he or she must not do so, they are not remotely to be regarded as **legitimate, available "options."** And Congressional

approval--which the president now has, effectively, unfortunately--cannot make that legitimate, moral or legal. Nor--as Thoreau would point out--would approval or toleration by the majority of a national public, or even unanimity, short of you and me (and, of course, many others, who might still constitute a minority in the relevant circumstances).

(I'm sure you agree with all the above except for the question of whether nuclear threats ever have been or ever could be "effective": something I have rarely addressed, and did not in the pieces you read.)

I do agree with you, unhappily, that Bush, Cheney, and perhaps a few others under them, actually have wanted and do want an occasion to demonstrate the credibility of their threats by carrying one out. Whether that has ever been true before, I don't know; I really suspect that Nixon and Kissinger shared this desire, but I can't cite strong evidence for it. And I think that the JCS really did want to use nuclear weapons against China, and sought occasions to do that: a major reason for their endorsement of provocative deployments into Laos and later, North Vietnam. Again, I can't prove it. But one thing seems clear to me, even irrefutable: earlier presidents **did** use their weapons by threatening them--whatever their expectations and intentions, whether or not such threats were either "necessary," or likely to be effective, or were effective in the event--and they almost self-evidently were **not** all, if ever, making the threat **in hopes of** carrying them out for demonstrative purposes to enhance the credibility of future threats, the motive you reasonably attribute to Bush II.

The same applies to Pakistani threats against Indian non-nuclear attack, and Israeli threats aimed at coercing us, as described above, and at assuring, by their buildup since 1972, that another full-scale non-nuclear attack against Israel is "off the table" for the Arabs. Likewise: we have created a strong incentive for Iran to acquire nuclear weapons (despite their present denials of any such intentions, which may be quite sincere for the Supreme Leader Khamanei) as a credible FU deterrent against U.S. non-nuclear attack, **even if** no one does carry out a third attack since Nagasaki. They can see that North Korea has bought useful deterrence by a first-use threat against a U.S. non-nuclear attack, despite the fact that it wld be suicidal for them to carry it out! Thus we encourage proliferation as much by our non-nuclear threats (against Iraq, North Korea and Iran) as by our example of our own first-use threats! I think your argument downplays or distracts from this very real danger.

All the major Democratic candidates and five major Republican candidates have joined with Bush and Rice in putting the nuclear first-use option "on the table." It wasn't "us" (or people who argue like me, of whom there aren't that many, I'm sorry to say) who enabled them, or put it there. It is the prevailing **belief**--among elites, and after sixty years of indoctrination, among most of the public-- that such threats are not only legitimate, but **essential** --both of which I will challenge as forcefully as I can, non-violently and truthfully, so long as I live--and that no one can be trusted to manage the American empire (not put in those terms, but that is the substance) who eschews that instrument, which has put the nuclear gun on the international poker table, endangering many lives in the immediate future and ultimately all life on the planet. We won't get it off the table, as we must, by trying to convince the imperialists that they are total fools for imagining that it can serve any of their purposes under any circumstances.

So I disagree with you as to how best to present the case, for no-first-use and for abolition. But I'm not sure I'm right; I never am. And I've often changed my mind, about tactics and about "the truth." (Your argument would not represent, for me, the truth.) So I value this exchange--which may change one or both of our mind--as I have valued, very greatly, our earlier exchanges and all your writings.

I do want to caution you about expressing the kind of warning to me you put in boldface at one point: that I am, by the nature of my argument, "in a lopsided way...helping the enemy." **Whenever** two people disagree in action about how best to address the arguments or tactics of political adversaries in a matter of grave import, there is a temptation, and some logical basis, for either one to accuse the other of "helping the enemy," even "betraying" (inadvertently) the shared cause. Let me suggest that that temptation should always be resisted, even if you privately think it is true. With all respect and affection, I must tell you that it is offensive, especially in boldface, in a way that does not serve our mutual, profoundly important objectives.

the charge

Now to get to your tactical point, at the end: I'm for all measures that de-legitimate first-use of nuclear weapons, in any or all situations. Your proposal is equivalent to the Vance Negative Security Assurance, without the qualifiers that are no longer relevant with the end of the Cold War. So of course, I would support your proposed initiative. Nor do I disagree with giving that overriding, even exclusive, priority ("just that narrow goal, nothing further"). It is the immediate issue. You won't get it passed, because it doesn't suit the imperial interests that determine Congressional majorities. But urging it, right now, would be very valuable, in the de-legitimation process over time, and would address the immediate issue of crucial importance. And fortunately, there are members of the House (the Senate? I don't know) who would be glad to sponsor such legislation, and drum up a sizable number of co-sponsors. Do it! You have my enthusiastic support!

Yours, Dan

But...

Caution and leaders believe, and are committed to that PC stands...

"Perhaps as far as - tell Bush II - and actually wanted..."